

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THEODORE ROOSEVELT'S ADMIRATION FOR LINCOLN

When Gutzon Borglum carved in a solid stone mountain of South Dakota the colossal sculptured figures of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt, he not only associated these four statesmen in a memorial of enduring rock but he linked them together in the thinking of Americans for all time to come.

This 1848 July day, following the proverbial "glorious fourth" might be a proper time to recall some of the remarks of one of these great patriots—one who demonstrated many of the qualities which set the other three men apart from their fellows.

Theodore Roosevelt was a life long admirer of Abraham Lincoln and his interest in the Emancipator was quickened by his participation in the laying of the corner stone of the Lincoln Memorial at Hodgenville, Kentucky, where Lincoln was born. This program was held in 1909 on the 100th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln.

One of President Roosevelt's personal testimonials about his admiration for Lincoln appears in a letter which he wrote on November 30, 1908 to Rev. Duncan Milner in which he said, "Great Heart is my favorite character in allegory . . . and I think that Abraham Lincoln is the ideal Great Heart of public life."

Earlier than the "Great Heart" allusion, President Roosevelt addressed some remarks in 1907 to the men of Illinois, Kentucky, and Missouri, and said in part, "This was the region that brought forth mighty Abraham Lincoln the incarnation of all that is best in democratic life."

The exceedingly strong word "mighty" used in this phrase, so characteristic of Roosevelt himself, was to find a threefold expression in what has proven to be the most famous of Roosevelt's many tributes to Lincoln. In his Lincoln centennial speech at Hodgenville, he referred to the Railsplitter as "the mightiest of the mighty men who mastered the mighty days."

Many painters, sculptors, poets, and orators have been indebted to Abraham Lincoln for the inspiration which has contributed to each one the creative urge for his masterpiece. This seems to have been true with respect to Theodore Roosevelt's speech at Hodgenville which was as highly praised as any one of his speech-making efforts.

The editor of *Harper's Weekly* in the issue of Feb. 27, 1909, had this to say about Pres. Roosevelt's speech at the centennial celebration: "So many speeches were made on the one hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's birthday that few found their way into print, but of those we have read that of President Roosevelt was incomparably the best . . . and will, in our judgment, stand out as the most satisfying effort Mr. Roosevelt has yet made."

Another editor reacted in these words to the speech of the President: "This address of President Roosevelt, coming at the culmination of seven years in the White House, may not be a classic tribute to the memory of the

man whose life has provoked so many of the finest literary minds of the world to a white heat of creative power, but it is unquestionably the highest attainment in words that Mr. Roosevelt has been permitted to reach."

Still another editor appraised the speech in this language, "In striking contrast to his usual style of exordium Mr. Roosevelt delivered an oration that was singularly free from the horatory note, while it fairly vibrated with the high-keyed quality of moral inspiration. It is well within the bounds of expectation to predict that this speech will remain the classic utterance of a President who has been unusually prolific in public addresses."

For the *Review of Reviews*, Roosevelt prepared on January 1, 1909, a complementary statement in which he said with reference to Lincoln: "His Gettysburg speech and his second inaugural are two of the half dozen greatest speeches ever made—I am tempted to call them the two greatest ever made." This statement was made four years before Lord Curzon delivered his famous address at the University of Cambridge on "Modern Parliamentary Eloquence." He named among the "three supreme masterpieces of English eloquence . . . two of Lincoln's speeches, The Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural."

In the *Review of Reviews* article Roosevelt added further testimony to the value of these two great speeches by commenting, "They are great in their wisdom and dignity and earnestness, and in a loftiness of thought and expression which makes them akin to the utterances of the prophets of the Old Testament."

Several years ago the Lincoln National Life Foundation acquired a Lincoln book, autographed by Theodore Roosevelt, and which may have been the last of the Lincoln books which he read. The author of the book was Gilbert A. Tracy who brought together under the title *Uncollected Letters of Abraham Lincoln* three hundred and fifty letters, notes and memoranda of Lincoln which had not appeared in the former compilations of Mr. Lincoln's writings. The volume came from the press in November, 1917, and both *The Nation* and *The Outlook* gave it extended reviews during the week of November 21.

Theodore Roosevelt became very ill in February, 1918, and underwent a surgical operation. While convalescing he suffered a relapse and again in the fall of the same year was again forced to be hospitalized. On January 6, 1919, he passed away.

It would appear that at some of these intervals he read the Tracy volume, as it is evident that he had before him the Nicolay and Hay compilation of Lincoln's writings when he prepared the article for the *Kansas City Star* published in that paper on May 7, 1918. There are several notations, check marks, and underlined passages in the Tracy book, some of which may have been placed there by the owner of the autographed copy.

In the Tracy book, autographed by Mr. Roosevelt, one of the many underlined Lincoln quotations, which may or may not have been marked by the owner, is this note to Richard S. Thomas dated March 1, 1848, with respect to another congressional term: "I am not a candidate for renomination or election."

It has been suggested that if Theodore Roosevelt had fully recovered from his physical disabilities in 1919, he might have again been called upon to become a candidate for the Presidency in 1920.